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SUBJECT: PDAS Mann in Chennai: Visas, Refugees and Politics

¶1. (SBU) Summary: During his December 16-17 visit to Chennai, SCA bureau Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Steven Mann met with visa staff and viewed visa processing, had talks with Sri Lankan refugee leaders and discussed politics and Indo-U.S. relations with journalist-insider Malini Parthasarathy. End summary.

A "Super Saturday" of Visa Processing

¶2. (U) Ambassador Mann arrived at post's visa unit just in time to observe the end of "Super Saturday" processing during which 800 applicants were interviewed (one of post's two working Saturdays in December). NIV managers walked Ambassador Mann through the visa process and briefed him on the Mission's on-going efforts to eliminate the visa appointment backlog, including, particularly, Chennai's work to meet south India's huge and growing demand for visa services. Interviewing officers demonstrated for Ambassador Mann the high-tech tools provided by the NIV system for screening applicants, documenting interviews and initiating necessary clearances. Later, Ambassador Mann had an opportunity to meet in a casual setting with most of post's 16 entry-level consular officers.

Discussion with Tamil Refugee Leader

¶3. (SBU) In a subsequent meeting with Sri Lankan Refugee Leader S.C. Chandrahasan, Ambassador Mann discussed the situation in Sri Lanka and the status of the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India. Chandrahasan, leader of the Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfFEER) and himself a refugee in India since 1983, outlined the educational progress of the refugees, commented on the status of the LTTE which he feels is facing a recruiting problem, and stated that he believes that now is a critical moment in the Sri Lanka situation as the entire world has focused energy and attention there. Mr. Chandrahasan reiterated his request that U.S. officials continue to inquire about the status of the Tamil refugees when meeting with Indian government officials.

¶4. (SBU) Chandrahasan, a good post contact and frequent source for our reporting on Sri Lankan refugee issues, told Ambassador Mann that there currently are 100 Sri Lankan Tamil refugee camps spread throughout the state of Tamil Nadu, with 30 camps having been added to accommodate the 16,000 new arrivals in 2006. Commenting on the current state of the LTTE, Chandrahasan said the LTTE appears to be facing a recruitment problem. According to information Chandrahasan received, the LTTE is telling young men not to marry as they are needed for the war. He said he sees the LTTE as monolithic, with Prabhakaran systematically eliminating all other senior leadership, refusing to trust anyone and assuming a bunker position. Describing his attitude as positive but realistic, Chandrahasan said this a critical time in Sri Lankan politics as the whole world's attention is focused on the problem.

¶5. (SBU) Malini Parthasarathy, Director of The Hindu and a member of the family that controls the newspaper, told Ambassador Mann she is optimistic about the long-term prospects for Indo-U.S. relations so long as the two countries can overcome the short-term challenges posed by implementation of the civil-nuclear agreement. Malini said she foresees strong resistance to the agreement from the Left, and she suggested that U.S. officials should seek out approachable left party leaders with to explain the agreement.

¶6. (SBU) Malini, who is considered close to Sonia Gandhi, underscored her admiration for the Congress leader and for Prime Minister Singh, and she praised the strong and effective relationship between the two. She predicted that the Congress would gain strength leading up to the 2009 elections. Moving to Tamil Nadu politics, Malini characterized the recent statements against the civil nuclear agreement by opposition leader and former Chief Minister J Jayalalitha as politically motivated maneuvering in order to separate herself and her party from the ruling DMK party, which is allied with Congress at the Center.

Hopper